

WASHINGTON, DC - Today, Rep. Pete Stark (D-CA), Rep. Patrick Kennedy (D-RI) and Rep. Jim Ramstad (R-MN) introduced the “Keeping Families Together Act,” a bill to help parents obtain necessary mental health treatment for their severely emotionally disturbed children without being forced to relinquish them into state custody to get that care. Senators Susan Collins (R-ME) and Mark Pryor (D-AK) introduced companion legislation in the Senate.

“The barbaric practice of child custody relinquishment is an ongoing national tragedy in which family after family is being torn apart,” said Rep. Stark. “It’s unconscionable that any parent should be forced to choose between keeping their child and getting them the medical attention they so desperately need. This is especially obscene given that effective mental health treatment goes hand in hand with strong family support. Turning a child over to state custody obviously shatters their family security.”

The “Keeping Families Together Act” provides \$55 million in new family support grants to states that are willing to end the practice of child custody relinquishment and cover all these children’s mental health services under Medicaid, CHIP or any other health program of their choosing. The family support grants can be used to improve access to mental health and family support services that keep families together. These grants can also be used to create statewide care coordination programs and to deliver mental health care and family support services for these families.

“Parents should not be bounced from agency to agency, knocking on every door they come to, in the hope they will happen upon someone who has an answer,” said Senator Collins. “It simply should not be such a struggle for parents to get services and treatment for children with serious mental illness.”

“Under our bill, states will have new resources and flexibility to put an end to this horrific practice,” Stark said. “More importantly, the federal government will be taking a step forward on this issue. We’ll be helping to make sure we as a society are doing better by our children, that families have options when it comes to getting help for their children, and that states are not left alone in confronting this difficult problem.”

“This legislation is in response to an April 2003 US General Accounting Office (GAO) report requested by the three legislators. The GAO found that 12,700 children from 19 states were

placed into the juvenile justice system to receive mental health treatment in 2001. The report recognized that the national problem is much larger since this survey was limited. The report can be accessed at: <http://www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-03-397>.

“I look forward to working with my colleagues to get this bill quickly passed so states can develop innovative new programs that address these children’s mental health needs while keeping them with their families. Once we’ve learned what has effectively worked at the state level to restructure these programs, we will need to return to this issue at the federal level and enact broad legislation to end the practice of forced child custody relinquishment nationwide,” concluded Rep. Stark.